

The Pallid Giant (by J. Pierrpont Noyes, 1928)

The pallid giant of the book's title is fear. And (implicitly) the desire for self-preservation, or, taking the preservation of the state, the survival and integrity of the nation, the group, even over the preservation of the self,

Fear is the emotion associated with, aroused by, a danger, a risk (an uncertainty), a "threat" whether impersonal or issued by some human or group, including the imminent and near-certain carrying-out of a threat expressed earlier by a person or group. Fear is aroused in particular by imminent danger to one's self, or to a group with which one identifies, an "entity" larger than oneself, or to members of that group. A danger to one of these of death, or of mutilation, or pain, or dissolution (of a group) or incapacitation or radically reduced capacity (of a person or a group), or of humiliation, shame, guilt, or other intense psychological pain (depression, anxiety, fear itself), or of loss of "honor" or of status, power, prestige within the group, or loss of membership in the valued group with which one identifies, ostracism. (Does one fear, in this way, one's own rage or hatred or the desire for revenge? Are these psychological "pains" in this sense?)

The magnitude of the desire for self-preservation (in these various senses of "self") is measured by the actions one will take to avoid these outcomes, the rules or taboos one will break, the painful consequences (especially for others) one will "accept."

But there are potential conflicts among, priorities between, these various concerns, fears. Protection of one's own body against pain, mutilation or death, has for most people very high priority, especially in an intense crisis where such outcomes are imminent and vivid. It may lead to a lowered concern for the group, for rules and taboos, for obedience to commands and promises. Yet the opposite may also be true. People often act in a crisis to protect or be obedient or "loyal/faithful" to a group or to prior commands and promises, commitments, at the cost of their own lives or bodies.¹

Such "fidelity" to pledges or to a group, acting to protect these rather than or more than one's own body or life, is "honored" by one's group, and even by other groups. (The foes of Rome cheer Horatius when he emerges from the Tiber, after he has risked his life to the utmost to defend Rome). But it has a darker side, which may or not also be admired, but which is certainly equally inculcated by the group. This puts the interests of one's group above the interests, the survival and well-being, of other groups, other people, including the most "innocent," least threatening, least responsible for one's or one's groups pain or danger: babies, children, women, sick, old, the weak, poor, powerless.

To carry out commands or rules of the group or one's prior promises or pursuit of ideals, humans often not only endanger themselves or accept injury or death for themselves but do the same for humans outside their own group, perhaps on a huge scale. And not only outside their group. In the interests of a cause or principle or a prior commitment, or of commands by group leaders and elite (whose interests may in this context conflict with those of the group as a whole or with those of

many others within it), they may endanger the survival, physical or organizational, of the group itself or of many of its members.

All of this may be prompted by obedience to commands or promises or by "honor," but it will often be a response to fear, including the fear of loss of honor (which may be associated with a failure to carry out a command or promise).

But for the fear to lead to certain responses, there has to be a belief that the response will or may have the effect of averting the danger. (Strictly speaking, fear in a person will often lead to responses that are uncalculated, "instinctive," "impulsive," not conscious "choices," and thus do not depend on conscious "beliefs" in effectiveness. But even so, these "instincts" or lack of compelling inhibitions against them, often reflect evolutionary developments in the species or experience of the individual that lead to behavior "as if" it could rationally, reasonably be expected to enhance survival. And all this applies as well, by analogy, to group or organizational behavior).

In "The Pallid Giant," the fear that what would now be called a weapon of mass destruction (WMD) is about to be used against one's own group leads to the preemptive use of that group's own WMD, because it is believed or hoped that this use will lessen the likelihood or magnitude of the destruction of one's own group by the other's WMD. That is, the purpose of this "preemptive" attack is not only, or not mainly, to punish the members of the other group, or to carry out prior deterrent or coercive threats against them (though these motives could also lead to such an attack). In the book (and in actual nuclear planning, by both the US and the Soviets or Russians), the attack in the face of feared attack is a desperate attempt, not guaranteed to succeed but the only available means, to "limit damage" from the opponent's attack, to avert it entirely or to avert total destruction from it.

To serve this aim, one's own WMD must be seen not only as threatening humans in the opponent's camp or country but as having the capability to destroy or to block or limit the operation of the opponent's weapons, its WMD's. This is not inherent in the definition or nature of a WMD. For example, most biological agents work only slowly, killing or incapacitating only after a lag, and mainly against unprotected targets, particularly civilians in cities. Thus, they don't prevent at all (or do so only very unreliably) the launching of weapons, including WMD's, by protected troops. They don't promise to limit the damage that the opponent's military forces can inflict.

But the weapons of vast destructive power premised in "The Pallid Giant" --e.g., triggering earthquakes--have the potential of blocking or limiting the operation of the opponent's weapons, if launched or operated in time, fast enough, first.

The basic message or insight of the book (first published in 1928, inspired by the prospect of aerial gas attack) is that in a system in which two or more nations have weapons with these properties, massive destruction can result on one or both sides without the existence or operation in either side of essential enmity, hatred, conflicting interests, or aggressive ambitions or impulses: only, fear and the desire for survival. For the attack which one side (A) fears, leading it to launch its own WMD defensively and preemptively, may itself have been inspired not by a desire to conquer or aggress or enhance interests other than survival, but by a corresponding fear in the other side (B) that it was about to be attacked, by A.

And why might B have had this fear? Not necessarily because it believed A to be ambitious, aggressive, malevolent, at all: but merely fearful of B's own WMD, fearful of B's fears and the damage-limiting potential of its WMD if it launches them soon enough, on the basis of early (and hence uncertain, perhaps fallacious) evidence, warning of attack. In other words, B may be responding to a false alarm, mistaken or misleading indications that A was attacking it. Given the existence on both sides of weapons with these destructive but also (launched early enough) protective capabilities, each party understands that ambiguous indications of an imminent attack may be valid (the other side may be attacking in response to a false alarm) and it may respond in fear and self-protectiveness to this uncertain danger by launching its own attack. Or, short of that, it may take preparatory or defensive alerting measures, which may be seen by the other side as possible evidence of an attack...leading to comparable measures or an actual attack by the other side, even though it had no such earlier intention....

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The author of "The Pallid Giant," J. Pierrepont Noyes, thus described an unstable system in which it is the existence of such weapons on both sides, given the beliefs about their efficacy (depending on early, fast use, thus prompted by information that is inevitably uncertain, incomplete, possibly misleading) and human fears and desires for survival, that gives rise to destruction on both sides that is massive though not complete. No need for hatred, anger, greed, lust for power or reward: just desire to survive and limit damage to one's own side to some level less-than-otherwise however catastrophic.

The weapons on each side, in the absence of aggressive intentions in either, may have been acquired solely to enhance security, to reduce danger, by deterring attack and by limiting its damage if it occurs. But for one side to acquire them is to encourage the other to get them too, for the same reasons. And when both have them, the security of each is reduced, the danger for each is increased, compared to the situation when neither had them or even to the situation when one had them and the other did not.

When both have these weapons that are vulnerable but potentially damage-limiting (if used preemptively), either one could reduce for itself the danger of total or massive destruction by giving up its own weapons, its own threat of such destruction against the other, unilaterally. But by leaving the other with a monopoly of such weapons, it might open itself to the other's threat of its weapons to back up lesser aggressions or to stiffen its position in intense bargaining. This lesser fear inhibits such unilateral action by either side, even though that could eliminate the danger of its own annihilation (or mutual annihilation).

This situation "invites" consideration of mutual renunciation of these weapons. But here again fear, Noyes' pallid giant, intrudes on each side. Fear that one's renunciation will after all be

unilateral, that the other will secretly retain its WMD or rearm itself with these or others, fear of "break-out" that will create a monopoly of such weapons that an enemy will use aggressively.

To the extent that mutual possession is seen as the most dangerous situation of all for both (and all other parties!), break-out or secret retention (which may always be discovered) will be inhibited by the expectation that it will lead to reconstitution of the unstable, mutual or multilateral possession.

But to the extent that another nation's aggressive tendencies (tempting it to acquire or exploit a monopoly of WMD) or its proclivity to preemption (its fears of attack, the uncertainties of its warning system, its trust in the damage-limiting potential of its own weapons) is feared, there will be proponents of avoiding or violating agreements to abolish such weapons in favor of having some for deterrent-and-damage-limiting reasons.

All this, thoroughly characteristic of the last fifty years of the nuclear era, is prefigured in the book written seventy years ago. In turn, that book described almost perfectly the military postures and thinking that preceded and triggered the First World War. It's not clear how much Noyes knew of and was inspired by the mobilization plans and preemptive intentions of nearly all parties in Europe prior to 1914, which fit his model exactly, and which correspond to the instabilities of the nuclear confrontation. He seems to have been inspired more by the prospect of air warfare and gas attack that emerged during the war. And in a later reprinting in 1946, he recognized in a preface that the atomic weapon seemed to embody his prophecy.

But in all these cases, air warfare, gas, or nuclear warfare, it is not the potential for destroying civilians in cities that gives rise to the instability. That alone would give rise to fear, but not to the response of preemptive attack. It is the preemptive damage-limiting capability, the potential for attacking the opponent's weapons and/or command and control of them and/or their effects on one's own population and weapons, that makes the system unstable, that allows mutual destruction in the absence of malevolence or aggressiveness, based only on fear roused by warning indications recognized to be uncertain and possibly misleading. (Neither gas warfare, nor biological attack, has ever yet acquired a reliable damage-limiting potential, because of technological limitations (not for want of trying), so neither have yet caused the instability that Noyes thought might be imminent with the threat of gas attack.)

It is possible to exaggerate the instability in a situation where both sides possess such capabilities to some degree. Inadvertently (in ignorance of the true Soviet posture and intentions) Albert Wohlstetter did that in 1959, with "The Delicate Balance of Terror" (and his earlier classified reports) as did Herman Kahn's On Nuclear War. For one thing, the Soviets had not sought to achieve, in a crash effort, and simply did not have the capabilities they supposed. And SAC knew that (secretly), which dampened the instability that might otherwise have been caused by false alarms.

But it is also possible to underestimate the reality of this instability in the nuclear era, and even such critics of the nuclear buildup as McGeorge Bundy have done that (along, I think, with most of my Establishment colleagues in the arms control movement, even many in Pugwash).

To ignore or reject the sincerity or the reality or the validity of such motives for possible preemptive attack as damage-limiting is to pacify public concern unduly. It is to overestimate, dangerously, the crisis stability of the nuclear balance, to underestimate the real dangers of nuclear catastrophe, and the need and urgency of changes in nuclear posture and policy in the US and Russia, the urgency of averting proliferation and the need to move toward abolition of nuclear weapons.

And this is what McNamara is still doing, when in the course of an argument that is otherwise well-stated he says that nuclear weapons do not have, and never have had, any military function other than to deter nuclear attack. That function they could serve (as could, say, an invulnerable biological warfare capability) without any damage-limiting claims, aims or capability. But he did not shape warplans, posture, or forces on that basis when he was Secretary of Defense (despite his rhetorical declarations of MAD), nor has any Administration since. Nor has the Soviet Union or Russia.

So he is ignoring crucial military functions--denying they exist--that actually critically determine the nature of these plans, postures, alert procedures and forces of the major nuclear weapons states, perhaps of all of them, in ways that have a crucial bearing on the risks of nuclear war, largely enhancing them for the international system as a whole. The danger of nuclear war largely reflects aims and functions of nuclear weapons which he either entirely ignores or which he denies having any reasonable, realistic appeal whatever. (The latter point would be an acceptable rhetorical exaggeration for some polemic purposes--it's not so far from reality--except that it can only lead to underestimating the appeal and power of these purposes to professional military men and even potentially to their civilian leaders in intense crises or faced with strongly-confirmed warning of imminent attack).

McNamara dodged Schell's question about what he would have advised the President to do in the event of actual, strong, warning of attack. Schell posed the question in terms of the legitimacy or appropriateness of "striking second," of carrying out deterrent threats essentially of retaliation or revenge. But the issue posed to the Secretary of Defense and the President would be whether or not to "strike second first," to limit damage by using US nuclears against military targets and perhaps against a wider range of targets as well. Thanks to the very weapons McNamara had developed and deployed (highly accurate, fast-acting missiles with multiple warheads) that situation would put very great pressure on a Secretary (not just the JCS) to advise preemption, and on a President to direct it. And if they refused to do so, there would historically unprecedented pressure on the minds of the JCS or lower military to ignore their decision and take their own initiative. None of this is hinted by, or warned of, in arguments like McNamara's which suppose that there are no motives for nuclear first-use in such a short-warning situation that could possibly interest or appeal to a reasonable, humane, civilian leader or a responsible military adviser. The situation is closer to that of the Pallid Giant than he acknowledges.

Moreover, incentives to maximise deterrence--of large-scale conventional attack, of biological attack, of limited nuclear attack, or of all-out nuclear attack involving decapitation--can lead to steps to automate retaliation in such circumstances. This can be done either by literally automating system response, removing human decision from it (as in the Russian "Dead Hand" launch-on-warning system, when it is fully turned on in a crisis) or simply by delegating authority to

launch nuclear weapons to a number of officers, producing many hands on triggers rather than many hands (or the President's hand) on safety catches, many "Go" buttons and no "veto." That enlarges the likelihood that one or more commanders will act on prior orders or plans, no matter how catastrophic the foreseeable consequences, or will give higher priority to "honor" or to illusory prospects of national survival than to considerations of genocidal massacre of others or the risk of hemispheric or global annihilation.

¹ This is the core meaning of "honor" (a value especially inculcated in, and expressed by, males, though a counterpart in females is the concern shown by a mother for her own infants). (In a patriarchal society, the literal term "honor" for females is associated with guarding her virginity and, later, her fidelity to a husband. Both of these are regarded as protecting an aspect of herself as her husband's property, her value to him as property and also his status, prestige and dignity in possessing a virgin-bride and a loyal, faithful wife. Thus, her honor consists in sacrificing her own impulses and desires to the "group" or more particularly, to its leader, her husband).

(Another meaning of honor, the counterpart of faithfully carrying out promises or paying debts, is the "faithful" carrying out of threats, or of avenging insults, deliberate humiliations. A reputation that makes one's threats of punishment or retribution credible, along with loyalty to the group including keeping its secrets at all costs, is the essential aspect of honor for the Mafia, which consists of "men of honor": or, to a large extent, the national security bureaucracy. Reliability in these respects makes a man eligible for membership in these honored societies, of "honorable men" (the title of William Colby's memoir of the CIA). In the CIA—a legitimized agency that functions very like the Mafia—"personal integrity" is supposedly regarded as particularly important in the selection of members (if the group is not to be regarded as meriting suspicion and fear in the larger society: like the Mafia), for two reasons. First, the secret-keeping frees the members from normal accountability for their actions. Second, behind this protective mantle of secrecy, their very function obliges them, not merely permits them, to act beyond the normal constraints of law and morality. Thus, their personal judgments that such normally-tabu actions are, in the particular instances, "necessary" and justified must be relied upon, without further monitoring and accountability, to be in line with what respected members of the larger society, or the larger society as a whole, would endorse if they were privy to the same secret information.

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February 15, 1998

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This situation "invites" consideration of mutual renunciation of these weapons. But here again fear, Noyes' pallid giant, intrudes on each side. Fear that one's renunciation will after all be unilateral, that the other will secretly retain its WMD or rearm itself with these or others, fear of "break-out" that will create a monopoly of such weapons that an enemy will use aggressively.

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So he is ignoring crucial military functions--denying they exist--that actually critically determine the nature of these plans, postures, alert procedures and forces of the major nuclear weapons states, perhaps of all of them, in ways that have a crucial bearing on the risks of nuclear war, largely enhancing them for the international system as a whole. The danger of nuclear war largely reflects aims and functions of nuclear weapons which he either entirely ignores or which he denies having any reasonable, realistic appeal whatever. (The latter point would be an acceptable rhetorical exaggeration for some polemic purposes--it's not so far from reality--except that it can only lead to underestimating the appeal and power of these purposes to professional military men and even potentially to their civilian leaders in intense crises or faced with strongly-confirmed warning of imminent attack).

McNamara dodged Schell's question about what he would have advised the President to do in the event of actual, strong, warning of attack. Schell posed the question in terms of the legitimacy or appropriateness of "striking second," of carrying out deterrent threats essentially of retaliation or revenge. But the issue posed to the Secretary of Defense and the President would be whether or not to "strike second first," to limit damage by using US nuclears against military targets and perhaps against a wider range of targets as well. Thanks to the very weapons McNamara had developed and deployed (highly accurate, fast-acting missiles with multiple warheads) that situation would put very great pressure on a Secretary (not just the JCS) to advise preemption, and on a President to direct it. And if they refused to do so, there would be historically unprecedented pressure on the minds of the JCS or lower military to ignore their decision and take their own initiative. None of this is hinted by, or warned of, in arguments like McNamara's which suppose that there are no motives for nuclear first-use in such a short-warning situation that could possibly interest or appeal to a reasonable, humane, civilian leader or a responsible military adviser. The situation is closer to that of the Pallid Giant than he acknowledges.

Moreover, incentives to maximise deterrence--of large-scale conventional attack, of biological attack, of limited nuclear attack, or of all-out nuclear attack involving decapitation--can lead to steps to automate retaliation in such circumstances. This can be done either by literally automating system response,

removing human decision from it (as in the Russian "Dead Hand" launch-on-warning system, when it is fully turned on in a crisis) or simply by delegating authority to launch nuclear weapons to a number of officers. producing many hands on triggers rather than many hands (or the President's hand) on safety catches, many "Go" buttons and no "veto." That enlarges the likelihood that one or more commanders will act on prior orders or plans, no matter how catastrophic the foreseeable consequences, or will give higher priority to "honor" or to illusory prospects of national survival than to considerations of genocidal massacre of others or the risk of hemispheric or global annihilation.